

1889 2014



125 JAAR
UNIE VAN UTRECHT



Bridge- building

Address of welcome from the Bishops of the Union of Utrecht on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of its founding.

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Dear sisters and brothers

“The Union of Utrecht is a union of churches, and of the bishops who lead them, who are determined to preserve and further the faith, worship and essential structure of the undivided Church of the first millennium.”

That is the first sentence of the Statutes of the Union of Utrecht and the bishops who met on September 24, 1889 in the bishop’s house in Utrecht, met with this intention. They wanted to be in communion with each other and they wanted their churches to see each other as sister churches. The basis of their communion stemmed from the words of Vincent of Lérins:

“We want to hold fast to that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all; for that is really and truly catholic.”

The bishops wanted to show that private opinions could not unilaterally be declared to be truth, because that would destroy community. Truth is a shared responsibility and a shared search. And it is God himself who calls people to this search and who encourages them by the Spirit to follow the way of Jesus and so discover “real love”. This search is the way of the Church as a community, and the call to this search is a call to all human beings. Church is community and therefore the schisms which resulted in the founding of the Old Catholic Churches are still felt to be wounds. Although these have healed in the course of time, they have left scars. Whoever believes in the reconciliation shown to us in Jesus does not seek division, but communion. So the Lord speaks to us through

the painful reality of disunity and invites us despite everything to be witnesses for reconciliation and communion. That was the motivation of the bishops 125 years ago and that is our motivation today. This fact determines our calling, our mission and our spirituality.

Bringing unity to pass

The break with the church was not something that was sought for at that time. However, a particular view of the church was being represented and this view was ultimately the cause of a schism. The proclamation of the gospel was both starting point and goal and it was felt that this was undermined by the reality of the Church. Both disunity among Christians and fear in some Catholic circles of modern developments obstructed Gospel preaching. In returning to the faith of the early Church the bishops saw an opportunity for developing an alternative way forward in both areas. It was their conviction that salvation was not to be found in withdrawal from society or in ignoring scientific and cultural issues. Moreover, the bishops and their church members questioned to what extent divisions in the Church are still meaningful. They represented a significant group of Catholics, who had joined the Old Catholic movement. They in fact formed an ecumenical movement *avant-la-lettre*, who actively tried, right from the outset, to restore unity with the Orthodox Churches and the Anglican Communion.

It was a matter of survival for the Old Catholic movement that they organize themselves in some countries as a local catholic church. This was initially the case in Switzerland and in Germany. These churches, together with the church in the Netherlands – which has different origins, but found itself striving for the same aims – took the initiative to form an international federation of Old Catholic Churches: The Union of Utrecht. Other churches have since joined this Union of Utrecht. It remains a great sadness that it was precisely those who felt called to fight for church unity, who were separated from the Church they loved so dearly. This is perhaps the reason why neither these churches nor the Union of Utrecht itself ever had great ambitions of power. Their wish was to work for ever greater fellowship and unity within the universal Church. The Union sought to build bridges and be a place of encounter for Christians of

different traditions. The aim was to contribute in this way to the ecumenical ideal of the unity of all Christians. To this day, the Union of Utrecht continues to work for ecumenism. Not only is the Union still open to new members, it is also engaged in dialogue with major Christian traditions and wants to be a meeting place for Christians who are seeking church communion within the early church understanding of catholicity.

Vision for the church

The Old Catholic Church bases its ecclesiological identity and theological agenda on the precepts of the Early Church. In addition, it tries to preserve continuity with the apostolic origin of the Church. In this, there are three points of fundamental importance.

The Church is a saving community, as it is in the church that the salvation given by God to humankind is made real. Because salvation must be tangibly experienced (or it is not salvation), it is worked out in the specific circumstances of people's lives. The Church, therefore, is always a local reality and the universal Church a conciliar fellowship of local churches. Salvation is "reconciliation". It is about reconciliation as given to us by God in Jesus Christ, i.e. it is about people's reconciliation with themselves, with each other and with God. Church exists to serve the reconciliation which God brings about. This service is crucial for the mission of the Church. Reconciliation results in community. The Eucharist is the source and expression of the Church, understood as community, which is celebrated by the bishop or, through him/her, by a priest. The office of bishop is to be understood as connecting the local church with its origins and as a sign of unity.

In building community, we are to be guided by some important convictions of the early church. When we speak of the universality of the Christian message, a message which is open to acceptance by all cultures in their diverse forms of expression; then it is precisely the communion of local churches, as practised in the early church, which opens the possibility of experiencing both unity in essence and diversity in structure of church life. Acceptance of the differences within mankind and between cultures

is a basic requirement for a communion of churches to function in mutual support, which makes it possible to experience reconciliation and healing. The same applies to the processes of exchange and communication which are an essential part of this communion. They are in fact crucial to the success of a communion of local and national churches with equal rights and of equal value. This communication within the local churches and beyond, at the level of communion, is necessary for the success of the communion.

A spiritual path

The catholicity of the Church is not merely a theological opinion, but the belief that the Holy Spirit has something to tell us in our relationship with people around the world. Through our tradition, we have some interesting ideological principles which must not simply be seen as frills that decorate our church. On the contrary, our tradition provides us with the guidelines we need to venture into life and into the world. Our tradition invites us to take other people and the world itself as seriously as God takes them.

In the Old Catholic way of being Christian, there are three central themes: open-mindedness, commitment and participation.

First, a word on open-mindedness. We can translate it as the need for sincerity (authenticity), which is so important to Old Catholics. Old Catholics are not satisfied with easy answers. They participate in life as it is. They want to hear the word of God in the reality of their lives. They want to open up a dialogue between the Word of God and the situation of humankind and the world. Faith is never something certain and conclusive.

Commitment is the second central theme. The best thing that can happen to a person is to know that he is committed to others, who are looking for travelling companions. Union with God can be seen in this way, too. God is totally committed to humankind. Commitment also means availability. Whoever is another's travelling companion is available to be on the look-

out together for a different quality of life and to work together towards it. Together with God, we hope that people's lives and their world will increasingly embrace the "quality of the kingdom". This quality is directly related to forgiveness and reconciliation, to making room for each other, to giving each other opportunities, in unity and peace.

God always leads the way in this, so faith is actually nothing but "co-operating with God". God is commitment in himself. Believing means answering the invitation to participate in this commitment. Participating in God's life-in-commitment: that is faith. This is the third theme. To participate in this divine commitment is pure grace: it is a gift, a gift for life! The church is an expression of this life-in-commitment.

The Risen Lord is the Head of the Church, for without his guidance we are without direction. He is the one from whom we learn to love. It is the Spirit of God who enables our hearts to love. The Spirit gives each one of us special gifts, every one of which makes an important contribution to the building up of the whole, so that the Church bears witness to the world of the "quality of the kingdom"! This does not come from ourselves: we receive it again and again when we break bread and share the cup in Jesus' name. Then we are once again newly forged into a people who live from God's love.

The church is expected to speak about Jesus, while Christians actively live as his followers. This requires immense open-mindedness, which leads to commitment to each other and to vigorous co-operation with God.

The present vocation of the Union of Utrecht

The Old Catholic Churches are called to contribute to the catholicity of the Church. The key to attaining this vocation is that each member may experience the power of a "spirituality of community" within the parish and the diocese. With this comes the awareness that this is in fact a contribution to the whole Church, the Universal Church. We ourselves can experience how this spirituality of open-mindedness/commitment/participation connects our churches with other churches: among the

sister churches of the Union of Utrecht, but also with the Anglican and Orthodox Churches, with the Philippine Independent Church; but also in our dialogues with the Orthodox Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Mariavite Old Catholic Church, the Mar Thoma Church in India and the Church of Sweden. This spirituality is a contribution to the unity and catholicity of the church. Old Catholics exist so that the Church is more "catholic": that is, better founded both on earth and in heaven.

Should one want to name an "Old Catholic charism", then it would be that faith always means heart and soul commitment to humankind and creation, because God enters into the same deep commitment to the salvation of both humanity and creation. This is the essence of the spirituality of the "trinity" of open-mindedness/commitment/participation.

One senses that this way of treating the world and the church is appreciated by other Christians. This is a sign that Old Catholic churches are called to play this role in the Universal Church. This means that it is not only our co-operation within the Union of Utrecht that is important, but also our joint ecumenical work. It follows that we must take steps to enter into new partnerships with other churches, and that we must actively seek to further our ecumenical mission. It means that we should also speak about this spirituality in international ecumenical circles, and that we should share it to enrich Christians from other churches. In this context it is clear that our small size is rather beneficial, because it means that we do not represent a threat to anyone. Our "authority" is based on lowliness.

We have already achieved some interesting results, but are just setting out on a path that leads us into the future. It is essential that this ecumenical work receive our wide support and participation. We therefore invite you all to support this work with your sympathy and prayers and wherever possible to engage actively in it so that our dedication to ecumenism has the full support of our communities and parishes.

In our time, in which the Christian world is divided by many moral questions, it is also vital to build a bridge between the so-called "liberals" and "conservatives". It would be short-sighted to commit ourselves to one of the two directions, both in theology as well as in ethics. Instead, we should strive to bring both parties closer to each other, and thus help to provide opportunities for exploring all points of view.

This task also calls us to the role of the "summoner"; the one who invites others to dialogue on the way to which we are called. Perhaps the authority of an ancient, traditional bishop's see, like that of Utrecht, can even here play a stimulating role.

"That which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all ..."

Vincent's counsel encourages us to continue building bridges and seeking communion. The monk of Lérins was seeking a way out for the widely diversified Christianity of his day, which was threatening to fall into total chaos. In our time, too, there is great diversity within Christianity. This is certainly an opportunity, but also a threat. The trick is to be clearly connected to each other in our diversity, so that discord and strife do not win the upper hand. This same challenge also has to be faced by the world. The situation of Christianity hardly differs on this point from the position of the world in which it exists. For this reason, God calls Christians, ever more clearly, to point the way to reconciliation, unity and communion, so badly needed by the world. On the 125th birthday of our communion, we speak loudly and clearly, as bishops of the churches of the Union of Utrecht, of our obligation to do this. Our spirituality of open-mindedness, commitment and participation awakens in us the gift of bridge-building and makes the churches of the Union and the Union itself places of encounter where communion and unity can still be discovered as gifts of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Blessed be God on this day of remembrance of all that our churches have achieved in the past 125 years; thanks be to God for all that His Spirit works in us to this day.

Utrecht, September 2014

Dr. Joris A.O.L. Vercammen,
Archbishop of Utrecht,
Chairman of the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference

Dr. Harald Rein,
Bishop of the Old Catholic Church of Switzerland,
Secretary of the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference

Mag. Dusan Hejbal,
Bishop of the Old Catholic Church in the Czech Republic

Dr. John Okoro,
Bishop of the Old Catholic Church of Austria

Dr. Matthias Ring,
Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of the Old Catholics in Germany

Dr. Dirk Jan Schoon,
Bishop of Haarlem

Dr. Wiktor Wysoczanski,
Bishop of the Old Catholic Church in Poland

1889 2014

125 LECIE
UNII UTRECHSKIEJ

Wstań i idź!

MIĘDZYNARODOWY KONGRES STAROKATOLICKI 2014

1889 2014

125 JAAR
UNIE VAN UTRECHT

Sta open ga!

INTERNATIONAAL OUD-KATHOLIEKEN CONGRES 2014

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125 YEARS
UNION OF UTRECHT

Get up and go!

INTERNATIONAL OLD CATHOLIC CONGRESS 2014

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125 JAHRE
UTRECHTER UNION

Steh auf und geh!

INTERNATIONALER ALTKATHOLIKENKONGRESS 2014

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125 LET
UTRECHTSKÉ UNIE

Vstaň a jdi!

MEZINÁRODNÍ STAROKATOLICKÝ KONGRES 2014

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125 ANS
L'UNION D'UTRECHT

Lève-toi et marche!

CONGRÈS INTERNATIONAL DES VIEUX-CATHOLIQUES 2014

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125 LECIE
UNII UTRECHSKIEJ

Wstań i kreni!

MIĘDZYNARODOWY KONGRES STAROKATOLICKI 2014